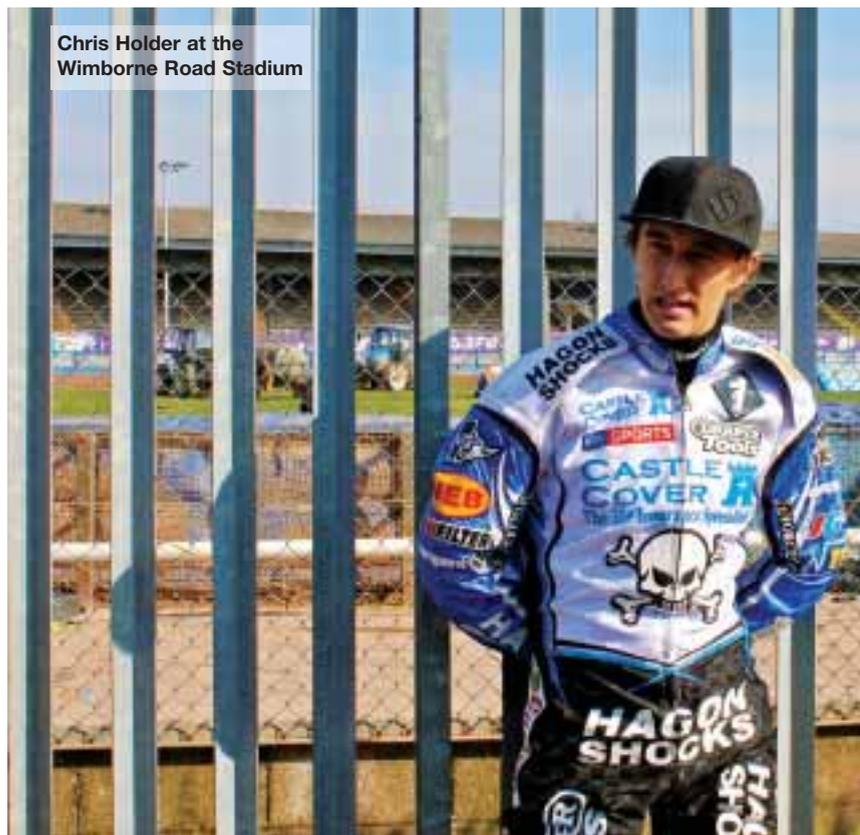


The Swashbuckling Heroes of Wimborne Road

PHOTO: MIKE HINNES

As the Poole Pirates end what could be a vintage season Jeremy Miles explores their illustrious and adrenaline-fuelled history



Chris Holder at the Wimborne Road Stadium

To the uninitiated it probably seems dirty, noisy and dangerous; an activity that defies comprehension. Why would anyone want to ride a motorcycle with no suspension and no brakes at speeds of up to 70 miles-an-hour, particularly when it involves going round and round in circles?

Yet every week between 3,000 and 4,000 people pack Poole Stadium to witness just such a spectacle. For them the thrills and spills of speedway is everything. The Poole Pirates are their swashbuckling local heroes. They're the jaw-dropping stars of the Elite League, a team of daring young men who literally put their lives on the line to prove that when, tested to the maximum, man and machine can be an extraordinary combination.

Watching the faithful packing the East Stand you can feel the tension as the riders scream down the home straight. They have already witnessed the heart-stopping shoulder-to-shoulder confrontations as, with engines roaring and one boot on the dirt, the boys in blue and white skillfully jockey for position. They round the final



The 2011 Poole Pirates launch team with boss Matt Ford (left), manager Neil Middleditch (right)

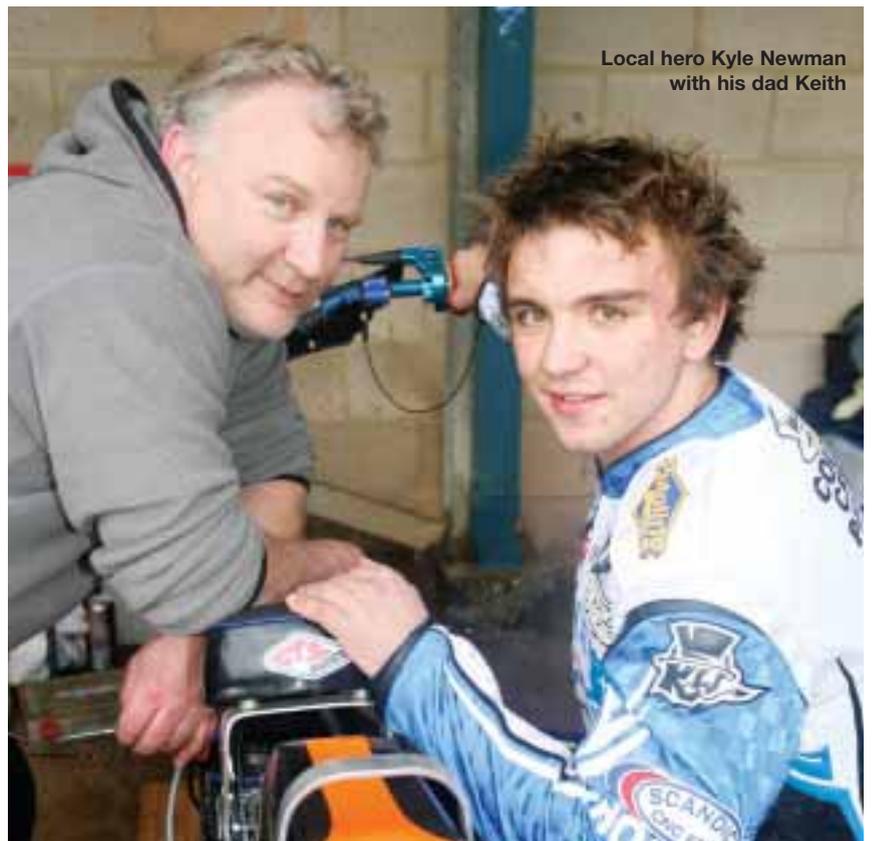
bend in a hail of grit and fumes and hurtle towards the finishing line. The crowd absorbs the emotion of this thrilling finale, gasping then punching the air as they cross the line; they are with the riders every inch of the way.

Speedway has been around for the best part of 90 years. The sport as we know it today started, at least as far as anyone can tell, in Australia in 1923. In December of that year the first report of a recognisable speedway event appeared in a New South Wales newspaper. However speedway-style 'broadsiding' - skidding on the rear wheel and controlling the slide with the throttle - had been gaining popularity in America for nearly a decade.

It is reckoned that the first meetings in the UK probably took place in 1927, but it's generally accepted that the sport didn't really arrive in this country until Australians Billy Galloway and Keith McKay arrived on these shores in 1928 with the specific intention of introducing speedway to the Northern Hemisphere. It was an instant success. The thrill of watching bikes with no brakes, broadsiding around corners on loose dirt attracted huge crowds nationwide.

Speedway arrived at Poole Stadium in 1948 when local riders forced to join

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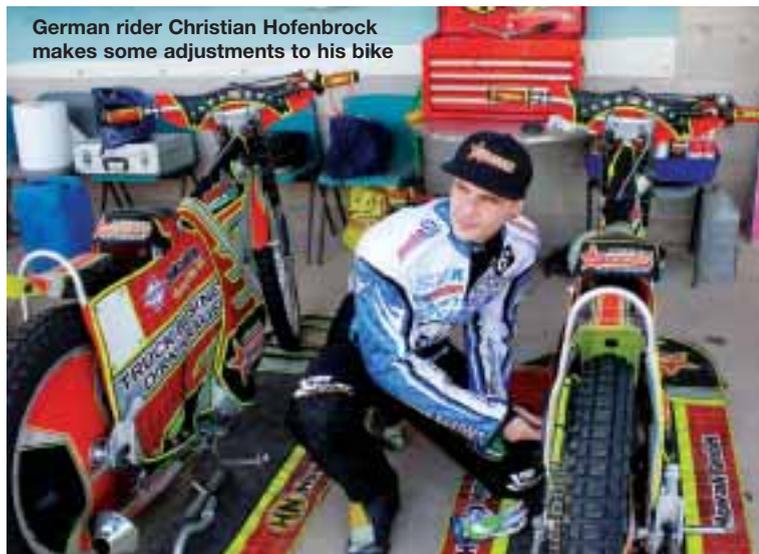


Local hero Kyle Newman with his dad Keith

PHOTO: MIKE HINVES



A mechanic works on a bike at Wimborne Road



German rider Christian Hofenbrock makes some adjustments to his bike

teams in other parts of the country campaigned to establish a home-based crew. They dug up the old tarmac cycle track at the Wimborne Road stadium, replacing it with a 384 metre purpose-built speedway track. The first meeting on 26 April 1948 took place in front of a 6,000 strong crowd. It turned out to be an inauspicious start for the members of what went on to become a truly great speedway team as the occasion was marred by the death of Yarmouth rider Reg Craven. The popular motorcyclist suffered terrible injuries when he crashed on the first bend and was hit by two other riders.

Looking at early speedway archive pictures - including some of riders wearing wooden crash helmets - it is clear that many advances have been made in terms of safety since those early days. It still remains a dangerous sport and crashes and injuries are an occupational hazard.

The current 2011 Poole Pirates Team (sponsored by insurance company Castle Cover) are an exceptional bunch made up of a German, a Swede, several Australians and an Englishman who just happens to come from Poole! Getting local boy Kyle Newman for the team was one of several coups pulled off this year by Pirates boss, local businessman Matt Ford. The up-and-coming 19-year-old first found popularity at Wimborne Road a couple of years back when he rode with the Bournemouth Buccaneers.

Another popular signing by Ford has been that of experienced 29-year-old Russian rider Renat Gafurov; though there were some nail-biting moments pre-season as red-tape slowed negotiations over his

work permit to a snail's pace. He received permission to ride in Britain for two years, just in time for the 2011 season.

Under their Aussie Captain, Davey Watt and the expert guidance of manager Neil Middleditch - a former speedway ace and one time Great Britain team manager - the Pirates have turned in some spectacular results this season and currently are top of the league.

Alongside 24-year-old Watt are fellow Australians Chris Holder, Darcy Ward and With engines roaring and one boot on the dirt, the boys in blue and white skillfully jockey for position



Captain Davey Watt with manger Neil Middleditch

PHOTO: MIKE HINVES

Jason Doyle, Swede Dennis Andersson and Christian Hefenbrock from Germany. International riders endure a hectic jet-setting life. In Gafurov's case it involved travelling from his base near Moscow just to attend the Pirates' Press launch earlier this year. Quite apart from having to call in at the Russian Embassy for his work permit en-route to Poole, he also stopped off in Poland to pick up his personal mechanic. Not surprisingly dealing with such a grueling schedule tends to suit those of a certain temperament. Speedway riders are fairly laid-back individuals and inveterate jokers. At the launch Watt mentioned that he and team-mate Darcy Ward had travelled more than 5,000 kilometres together last year. He thought about it for a moment before adding dryly.... "which is probably about 4,000 too much!" □

Speedway Playoffs

The speedway season runs from March to October, the month which sees the culmination of the Elite League in the playoffs, which are as follows:

- 26 Sept: Semi Final 1st Leg**
- 3 Oct: Semi Finals 2nd Leg**
- 10 Oct: Final 1st Leg**
- 17 Oct: Final 2nd Leg**

It is probable that Poole Pirates will have a choice of opponents as they are favourites to finish top of the league but that could change. Poole Pirates are likely to opt for the 2nd leg of the semi-finals to be their home one. More details poolepirates.co.uk

PHOTOS: JEREMY MILES